

Chris Botti channels influences into a unique live experience

By L. Kent Wolgamott

Chris Botti has a Grammy Award and a stellar reputation as one of the finest jazz trumpeters working today. But, what he doesn't have is a hit.

"I'm a musician. I don't have a hit song," says Botti, who comes to Ocean Resort's Ovation Hall 8 p.m. Saturday, March 30. "If you look at Chris Isaak, Frank Sinatra, Paul Simon, they have a hit song. Did K.D. Lang play 'Constant Craving'? You can't ask that about me. I have a hit band, a hit show. Over time, the exit poll for the show -- I play 260 times a year -- brings people in."

Botti's Grammy is a Best Pop Instrumental Album award for 2013's "Impressions." But he's really not a pop musician.

"I'm a trumpet player first and a jazz musician second and I'm an entertainer. That's my real problem with jazz. They think if you're trying to be an entertainer, you're diminishing the music. I've got a newsflash for them. Louis Armstrong, Cannonball Adderley, Dizzy Gillespie were all entertainers. Miles turning his back on the audience was his entertainment, a shrewd move."

Miles, of course, would be Miles Davis, the legendary jazz trumpeter who, decades ago, prompted the young Botti to decide to play music for a living.

"He inspired me to be a professional musician," Botti says. "My start came when I saw Doc Severinsen on TV. For pursuing the trumpet, I had Doc. That was when I was 9. When I was 12, I heard Miles and the whole thing just clicked. Doc was a great trumpet player, still is. But he was all flash. With Miles, that brooding beautiful sound is what got me."

Forty three years after he heard "My Funny Valentine," Davis continues to play an important role in Botti's music.

"We play a couple songs from 'Kind of Blue' every night," he says. "It's very evident with the way I play, the horn muting that I'm very influenced by Miles."

Botti and his band play Davis' music at every show, part of a wide-ranging, stylistically varied repertoire that knows almost no boundaries.

"For anyone who hasn't come to one of my shows, it's hard to explain it," Botti notes. "If I'm going to see U2, they're going to play their hits and there's going to be a light show. You understand that. They don't understand that with me. They're coming to see a band with three singers, one of them's an opera singer, one of them's a jazz singer, one of them's an R&B singer. It's all over the place."

Prior to leading his band, Botti played in the bands of music legends, starting with Frank Sinatra when he was still at student at Indiana University. He spent a decade touring and recording with Paul Simon and, during that period also performed with the likes of Joni Mitchell, Aretha Franklin and Sting.

“Being around Paul Simon, Sting and Joni Mitchell, I learned a lot about being a band leader,” Botti says. “My first gig was with Sinatra. He wasn’t just a singer, he was an entertainer and a band leader. He was like (comedian Don) Rickles, except he sang. He would talk to an audience, not at them. That’s something I learned early, how to interact with an audience.”

For Botti, touring and connecting with the audience takes precedence over simply recording an album, especially in today’s fledgling record business.

“I really don’t know why you would do it,” says Botti, who might just make an album this year anyway. “We did a live DVD last year that’s out there. We play a show and people put it on Twitter, they put it on YouTube, that’s the record of it. I suppose I’ll make a record this year. But I don’t know. I’m better at my craft. I’m a better trumpet player than I was 9 years ago, 5 years ago. But I’m a touring act.”